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The Value of the Liberal Arts
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I'm please to be part of this panel, but in some respects it's disquieting that we're even addressing the issue of the importance of the liberal arts, because in doing so, it begs the question of whether they do, in fact, have value.

Indeed, it seems almost unthinkable that anyone would question the value of the liberal arts, not only to the economic health of the state but the civil and social health of the planet. Yet our colleges and universities have undergone a fundamental shift: at the turn of the 21st century, nearly 60% of the degrees awarded are in a pre-professional or technical field, up significantly from the time I received a BS just 33 years earlier. This is largely due to the demands of today's students.

Speaking at the American Association of Colleges and Universities 2003 annual meeting, Harvard's Ellen Condliffe Lagemann posed the challenge that the primary purpose of a liberal education should be to nurture an initial sense of vocation. In doing so, she made clear the differences between vocation – the development of ones self and occupation – and ones job alternatives. Despite the heavy emphasis on pre-professional degrees, we know that many of today's graduates are looking for a vocation – not only earning a living but searching for a sense of who they are, what they stand for, what they value.

The truth of the matter is that one's vocation really has a profound impact upon one's occupation. Thus, the liberal arts are central to developing what is not only good for the individual, but what is good for the economy and

what is good for society As we go about teaching history or math or English or philosophy or biology, what we need to bear in mind is that we are not just teaching disciplinary matter that is described by the title of the course.

Philosopher William James said that a liberal education should “*help you ... know a good man when you see him.*” What business and industry is looking for today is not only young people who can do well certain tasks that come with mastering occupational education. Rather they are looking for good men and women who are able to think for themselves, to work in teams, to find solutions to problems that arise from creativity, to respect those who look unlike themselves. In short, they are looking for individuals who can fit in an interconnected society and a global economy. They are seeking not only students who can navigate the Internet, but who can discriminate misinformation and half-truths (that can now be propagated at the speed of light) from valuable information that can be used to further business and society. And once their educated employees have found and verified that the information is useful, they need to be able to communicate it effectively to others.

Now I know that my asserting the value of the liberal arts is open to suspicion. After all, I am the campus executive of a college that does little but provide the liberal arts. So I offer to those of you who need to hear from what I grudgingly refer to as the “real world” the following:

Robert Caret, President of San Jose State University, writing in the September 27, 2002 issue of *Silicon Valley Business Ink* asserts that liberal arts graduates are equipped to succeed in a rapidly changing workplace because they can evolve with the changing needs of the company.

Roger E. Herman, CEO of The Herman Group, a strategic business futurist, and THE FUTURIST'S contributing editor for work-force and workplace trends points out that the changing relationship between employee and employer suit the liberally educated much more effectively than those narrowly trained. Herman says, ***“Insightful leaders now recognize that a liberal arts education prepares graduates to think more broadly, to conceptualize at a multi-disciplinary level that's more responsive to the increasingly broad issues confronting people in all walks of life.”***

The trends making this the case include increasing demands by business for individuals who can adapt not only as jobs undergo rapid evolution, but also as a result of technology changes that will put a premium on individuals who have learned how to learn.

No longer is the world of work – at least at the most successful companies – one of unyielding hierarchy. Today’s employees are expected to make cogent arguments and be facile in dealing with new situations. They must be able to negotiate with skill and be respectful not only of their bosses, but their peers and subordinates, many coming from diverse cultural backgrounds.

When Michael Mooney first became president of Lewis & Clark College, he visited the founding partner of a major Portland law firm and was asked about the College's curriculum. ***“We get a lot of students from fine schools, the partner explained, yet many of them fail here as associates. ‘Do you know why? It's not,” he continued, “because they don't know the law. It's because they can't write.”***

Liberal arts education has an unprecedented opportunity to make the difference. Labor economists assert that 70% of the jobs that will occupy the workplace of the 21st century are yet to be described. So how can we as colleges and universities prepare students for jobs that don't yet exist? The unequivocal answer is to provide them with the ability to think and read critically, to write and communicate effectively, to ask intelligent questions.

In April of 2000, when Canadian higher education was facing significant budget cuts, the CEOs of Canada's high tech industry issued a statement imploring lawmakers to maintain the funding needed for their business. They wrote ... ***"it is impossible to operate an effective corporation in our new economy by employing technology graduates alone. A liberal arts and science education nurtures skills and talents increasingly valued by modern corporations."*** The corporate signers read like a list of Who's Who of the Fortune 500: Cisco Systems, Sun Microsystems, Charles Schwab, Motorola, Compaq, Xerox, Hewlett Packard, Lucent Technologies, and ATT, among many others.

Shortly after I was asked to serve on this panel I mentioned to a few of my associates that I was to speak about the value of the liberal arts to the economic health of the state. Within a day I had a book in my hands and the firm message from the director of development for my campus' foundation that I really needed to read it. The book is Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*. This is a remarkably insightful volume of research that suggests to me that the answer to the economic difficulty Wisconsin has faced is not what most of have been thinking, or more importantly doing. Conventional wisdom says that we need to grow our way out of the economic doldrums by creating more jobs. I'm convinced that Wisconsin's

manufacturing economy will never again achieve what it has in the past and we must shift our emphasis.

For many years we have heard about the tax climate of Wisconsin stifling economic growth. If reducing services and taxes were the answer, we would not have 48 out of our 50 states experiencing what has been characterized as the greatest economic downturn since WW II. If on the average Wisconsin taxes are too high, then logic would dictate that those states with lower taxes would not have the problems we have. But this does not stand up to the test.

University of Pittsburgh economist Patricia Beeson's research has found that investments in higher education infrastructure predicted subsequent growth far better than investments in physical infrastructure such as canals, railroads, or highways. Indeed, Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina once told this nation's governors: "***Keep your tax incentives and highway interchanges; we will go where the highly skilled people are.***" "I believe Fiorina is talking about creative people.

Creativity is defined as the ability to create meaningful new forms. I'm virtually certain some of you have read Florida's book. In fact maybe some of you have heard him speak. After reading it myself, and investigating further what other are now writing about the need to attract the young and the highly educated, I come to the conclusion that if we are going to grow Wisconsin's economy, it is time to start paying pretty close attention to what Florida has found in his research as a Carnegie Mellon professor. Other states are doing just that, so if we are not, we had better get going.

The Washington Times, quoting Florida, wrote *“The 38 million members of this class make up 30 percent of the U.S. work force and hold the key to the nation's economic future.”*

Briefly, what Florida has found in his research is the following:

- Our economy is moving from an older corporate-centered system defined by large companies to a more people-driven one.
- Human creativity is the key factor in our economy and society.
- Creativity is the decisive source of competitive advantage
- Technological and economic creativity are nurtured by and interact with artistic and cultural creativity.

Florida ranks cities based upon their “creative index.” Several Wisconsin cities are listed. Every single one of them has a liberal arts university. Madison is the most highly rated. Madison attracts the greatest number of creative people on a per capita basis, and it is tempting to say that it’s because of the research prowess of the Madison campus. There may be some truth to that. But I will hypothesize that it is also because the culture of Madison is one that those of us from the outlying areas make jokes about. Statements like “Madison is a 39 square mile island surrounded by reality.”

Generally speaking, Madison is not characterized as to the right of center in any of its attitudes. It has a prominent and significant gay and lesbian population. Walking down State Street one notes an incredible diversity of race and cultures. The level of education in Madison on the average is the

highest in the state. But among all else, it is an extremely tolerant community.

I venture to say that most of Madison's strength is drawn equally from having a world-class research university and a population that has been educated in the liberal arts. Where else does one learn about different cultures? How else does tolerance and acceptance of people develop, especially if one's family is not the bastion of understanding?

Florida writes that *“universities are hubs for the creative class; they are engines for economic development but not only because of the research that results in business spin-offs. They have three interrelated roles: Talent, Technology and Tolerance.”*

I will leave you with a few quotes. These span 100 years of thought about the subject at hand:

Henry Ford: *“The qualities that employers seek are the concern and result not so much of specialized education as of liberal education.”*

Geo. Mead (Consolidated Paper Co.) *“Perennially, it seems, we have to convince the public of relevance of the liberal arts and sciences. However, I would argue that there in no time like the present when undergraduate liberal education has been more important. It is through [liberal education] that our students are prepared for the changing work and living environment. It is our [liberal arts] graduates who are most able to adapt to these changes.”*

Richard Florida: *“Access to talented and creative people is to modern business what coal and iron ore was to steel-making.”*

For me the direction clear.